Noun categorization: from grammar to communicative interaction

When: April 18-19, 2019
Where: Laboratoire Dynamique Du Langage (DDL), Université Lyon 2, France
Format: 30-min presentations and round tables
Organizers: Rosa Vallejos (University of New Mexico & Collegium de Lyon)
             Thiago Chacon (University of Brasilia & Collegium de Lyon)
             Françoise Rose (Dynamique du Langage, CNRS)
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Noun categorization devices denote properties of nouns and nominal referents. Languages share striking similarities concerning the types of semantic distinctions, the items that markers can be associated with, and the grammaticalization paths followed by those markers. Classificatory morphemes most likely provide information about animacy, sex, physical properties and functionality (Denny 1976, Allan 1977, Croft 1994); they can generally occur on nouns, several modifier types, predicates, as well as pronouns (Aikhenvald 2000, Grinevald 2000). Nevertheless, there is wide cross-linguistic variation among the documented systems (Seifart 2010). The similarities and diversity of classificatory patterns raise questions regarding the extent to which they reflect the way we perceive and construe the world we live in, and to what extent the documented similarities reflect underlying, general cognitive processes in the human mind. A question of theoretical interest is whether classificatory systems can be accounted for by externally motivated explanations grounded in notions such as prototypicality, frequency, and ease of acquisition, and/or in terms of arbitrarily conventionalized facts about the grammar of individual languages.

While the categorization of nouns is a universal and pervasive aspect of human languages, typological proposals tend to highlight a finite set of grammatically relevant categorization devices: noun/gender classes, noun classifiers, numeral classifiers, genitive classifiers, verbal classifiers, locative classifiers (see, for example, Aikhenvald 2000, Dixon 1986, Grinevald 2000, Grinevald & Seifart 2004, among others). However, there are a number of other structural strategies that do not fall neatly within these more well-known types (Aikhenvald 2000, Grinevald 2015). In addition, multiple overlapping systems can co-exist in a single language, or a single system can have multiple functions in the same language (e.g. agreement and representation of referents, cf. Fedden & Corbett 2017, Contini-Morava 2013, respectively).

Noun classification has been extensively dealt with in terms of semantic and morphosyntactic variation. However, the pragmatic side of this phenomenon in general, and its role in communicative interaction in particular, have received much less attention (but see Seifart 2005, Contini-Morava & Kilarski 2013, Farmer 2015). This is surprising, considering that the primary functions of noun categorization devices are said to be classification, individuation, reference building, and reference tracking of entities in sustained discourse.

The proposed workshop can advance this debate by examining new bodies of data from languages under-represented in the literature. It can contribute to the development of a more fine-grained typology taking into consideration a multidimensional approach, as suggested by Seifart (2010) and Grinevald (2015), among others. We invite contributions from scholars of different theoretical orientations, on in-depth, preferably usage-based research of different aspects of noun categorization devices, including (albeit not exclusively):

- The motivation for using a classifier in narratives and conversation for certain referents is not always obvious. What are the discourse functions of noun categorization devices in a given language? How dependent are these devices on the pragmatic context, the interlocutors' familiarity with the referent, specific cultural practices, and world views?

- Systems allow for some semantic heterogeneity within each "category". This suggests a continuum within a given group, from prototypical to less prototypical exemplars. If the sorting is established according to perceptual properties, how much room is there for intra- and inter-speaker variation?
- While in some languages each noun is associated with one classifier, in other languages there is a degree of flexibility with regard to the choice of classifier in order to differentiate shades of meaning. How can pragmatics explain the choice of classifiers? And to what extent do these classifiers display inflectional and/or derivational characteristics for the creation of lexical items, agreement and cross-referencing?

Submissions:
Please send your abstract to nominalcategorization.lyon2019@gmail.com by **December 01, 2018.** Notification of acceptance: December 30, 2018. Abstracts should be no longer than two pages, including examples and references. Send PDF files using Unicode fonts. Papers can be presented in English, French, Spanish or Portuguese, but there must be a handout in English.

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